Teaching Social Skills to Enrich the Lives of Children and Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties

Being able to interact successfully with others is a key to many of the experiences that enrich life, such as having friendships, participating in recreational activities, or joining groups or clubs. For children and youth with emotional, behavioral, or mental health disorders, difficulties with social interactions are common; in fact, having difficulties in this area is often a key feature in the diagnosis of these disabilities. For young people who experience difficulty in building and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships with peers and adults, social skills training is often recommended as an intervention. This does not mean, however, that social skills training is always *effective*; on the contrary, the effects of social skills training on students with emotional and behavioral disorders tends to be quite weak. However, results from recent research provide some insight into the characteristics of effective social skills training programs. Applying this knowledge to the design and implementation of social skills training programs can increase the probability that the training will indeed result in students' gaining access to enriching interactions and activities.

What exactly are the skills that social skills training works to strengthen? Some examples are: dealing with anger appropriately, asking questions, accepting consequences for one's behavior, listening, following directions, successfully dealing with losing, making friends, compromising with peers, seeking attention properly, taking turns, and accepting "no" for an answer. While it may be relatively easy to teach a student to perform a given skill on command in a classroom setting, social skills training is not likely to be effective unless the skills "work" for the student in his or her daily life. Research supports the idea that new behaviors can be taught and learned through direct instructional techniques. However, many times the skills are taught in contrived settings (Gresham, 1998) and have little meaning or utility to the student outside of those settings. A social skill which brings positive consequences to a student is a skill which he or she will be likely to repeat.

Research has shown that "naturally occurring reinforcers," such as praise, attention, and positive feedback are the most effective way to encourage new behaviors in different settings. It is therefore important that skills which are taught in social skills training are also reinforced in other settings. For example, students may learn at school that phrasing requests to adults in a respectful fashion leads to praise *and also* makes it more likely that the student will get what he or she asks for. If the same is true at home, there is a greater probability that the desired skill will become a part of the student's behavioral repertoire.

A common pitfall with social skills training is teaching behaviors that will not be reinforced naturally and, therefore, will have little meaning outside of the teaching setting. For example, if a child's attempts to make respectful requests tend to be ignored by adults or peers outside of the teaching setting—and if yelling or tantrums actually results in the child's getting what he or she desires—there is little likelihood that the child will continue trying to make such requests. What is more, many times behaviors that are targeted for change in social skills training are behaviors that will make it easier for teachers to manage classrooms and are often taught and maintained only in that setting. An example of this may be the "skill" of raising your hand to speak. While this skill may be important in the classroom, it is rarely used in the natural environment. What is more useful for the student is to learn several appropriate strategies for starting and maintaining conversations and then to learn how best to match a particular strategy to a particular setting.

One of the most consistent and longstanding criticisms of social skills training programs is that the skills which students learn during the training are often

not maintained or generalized—in other words, students do not use the skills in different settings with different people across time. Often, social skills training provides little or no opportunity for students to practice skills in a variety of settings. Goldstein, Glick, and Gibb's (1998) practice of implementing "social skills homework" addresses this problem by assigning social skills activities for the students to practice in settings outside of the training setting. The student is taught the social skill, then expected to practice the skill independently and report back the outcome. From this report, the student and coach then work together to generate new, appropriate strategies if the new skill was not successful. Another approach is one in which coaches accompany the students outside the training setting and help them apply the target skills in various contexts.

In a recent comprehensive review of research evidence on the effectiveness of social skills training, Gresham (1998) concluded that the social skills training programs studied did not seem to be particularly effective for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Gresham (2001) cites several likely reasons for the weak effects of social skills training. Foremost among these reasons are that the skills tend to be taught in artificial situations and that the skills are often not reinforced in the student's natural environment. Gresham also points out that research offers a fair amount of guidance regarding how to create social skills training interventions that are more likely to be effective. Among the recommendations which Gresham distills from relevant research are the following:

1. The most effective social skills training appears to include some combination of modeling of the desired skills, coaching in performance of the skills, and reinforcement for use of the skills.

2. Social skills training is more likely to be effective if it occurs in naturalistic settings—home, school, and community—and if it can capitalize on naturally occurring incidents ("teachable moments") to teach or enhance a desired social skill.

3. Social skills training needs to be more frequent and intense than the current norms. One likely reason for the failure of the studied programs is that the amount of instruction—e.g. thirty hours spread over ten to twelve weeks—was not sufficient.

4. Social skills training may be more effective if it reaches a child at a younger age, preferably before age eight.

Social skills training which is matched to the particular needs and strengths of a given student is more likely to produce positive results. Most programs currently do not tailor training with regard to a student's existing levels and areas of competency and challenge.

Some of the most current and promising social skills programs (Sugai, 1996; Project Achieve, http://www.air.org/cecp/teams/greenhouses/projectachieve.htm) include the entire school setting. These programs hold all students accountable for appropriate social behaviors rather than singling out students with behavioral difficulties. Another important facet of promising programs is their focus on promoting the use of appropriate or positive behaviors in a preventative manner. Research is clear that, in the long run, prevention is more effective than waiting for a problem to occur and then reacting to it (Scott & Nelson, 1999).

Positive, school-wide, behavioral programs promote desired student behaviors and communicate consistent, high, and positive behavioral expectations. Some of the components of positive behavioral interventions include the following circumstances (see: www.pbis.org):

◆ Behavior expectations are defined.

◆ Behavior expectations are taught where teachers model the expected behavior.

◆ Appropriate behaviors are acknowledged and students are reinforced for demonstrating these behaviors.

◆ Behavioral errors are corrected proactively, before the behaviors become more serious. This is so that the student, teachers, and administrators can all predict what happens next.

◆ Social skills program evaluations and adaptations are made by a team. Administrative support and involvement is strong.

◆ Individual student support systems are integrated with school-wide discipline programs.

In these programs, it is not just the students' responsibility to learn appropriate social skills, but also the responsibility of the adults who come to contact with them to model, support, and encourage desired social behaviors. Adults must examine their own role in interactions with students and work to establish situations in which the student can demonstrate, and be rewarded for, appropriate social skills. Unfortunately, many adults are unfamiliar with best practices in social skills training. They often unknowingly reinforce negative social behavior through hostile escalation in an effort to "get

tough" with students who do not meet behavioral expectations. Adults need to know that the focus of a good social skills training program is promoting the use of positive skills, rather than simply reacting to inappropriate social behaviors.

If interventions are designed with these issues in mind, it is likely that they will be effective in teaching social skills to students and thereby increasing their ability to tap into life's enriching activities both on the school campus and off.

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Megan M. McGlynn *is a doctoral student in the Special Education Program at Arizona State University.*

Robert B. Rutherford*, Ph.D. is a professor in the Special Education Program at Arizona State University.*